

# dance

EUGENE WEEKLY'S 2014 GUIDE

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## Turning Pointe

*Native Eugenean Rachel Richardson begins her pivotal second year at the American Ballet Theatre*

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# Life AT THE Barre

A PORTRAIT OF THE BALLERINA AS A YOUNG WOMAN by Alex Notman



'IT'S SUCH A CHALLENGE. I LOVE PERFORMING, WHICH IS SOMETHING I THINK I'VE GROWN INTO,' RACHEL RICHARDSON SAYS

LUIS PONS PHOTOGRAPHY

While in Moscow last autumn, ballet dancer Rachel Richardson experienced a decidedly Russian moment at the gilded Kremlin Palace.

"It was crazy," she recalls with a laugh. "While we were backstage, 80 military men in the stereotypical fuzzy hats with their machine guns were marching through, literally right next to us as we were warming up."

The native Eugenean traveled with New York's American Ballet Theatre for the famed Bolshoi Ballet's 240th anniversary. It's an hour into our discussion over coffee at Noisette Pastry Kitchen, and her mention of the trip to Russia is the first time Richardson (who is home for summer break) sounds like the teenager she is. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. It was totally amazing," she says. "First of all, Russia is not somewhere I would pick to go on my own but I was really grateful I had a reason to go because it was really cool." She adds, "The food in the Bolshoi Academy was like, *horrible*."

Pursuing a career in ballet would cause anyone to grow up fast. The life of a dancer starts early with years filled by long, regimented days, as well as often having to leave home at young age.

At 17, Richardson has been dancing almost half her life. She is gearing up to begin her second year in the Studio Company for the America Ballet Theatre (ABT), considered one of the most prestigious classical ballet companies in the world. And in the ballet world, 17 is known as the year a dancer must start looking for a job in a profession with limited, and highly coveted, spots. This is the pivotal year in Richardson's path from Eugene to New York City, and the journey has been one of adventure, discipline and self-discovery.

Shelly Richardson, Rachel's mother, tells me over the phone that her daughter first tried soccer and gymnastics

before coming to ballet, adding that hers is not the traditional ballerina story. "She did not have posters of ballerinas in her room when she was little," Shelly Richardson says, laughing. When Richardson was nine, her sister's ballet teacher, John Grensbeck of Eugene's Oregon Ballet Academy, noticed her "good feet" and persuaded her to take a class.

"At 13, we saw that she had some potential," Shelly Richardson says, adding at that point, "As a family, we committed to go full bore for one year at a time."

That was the year that Rachel and Shelly Richardson made the big leap and relocated to Philadelphia — leaving her sister and father behind in Eugene — to attend the Rock School for Dance Education, where she trained for the better part of four years. There the duo lived in co-ed dorm apartments across the street from the school with ballet students from around the world; Shelly Richardson was the designated dorm mom. Rachel's days were spent balancing her classes in classical ballet technique, contemporary dance, pointe and pilates while homeschooling with her mom.

"It was really different," Rachel Richardson says. "It's a really big city. It's pretty dirty and kinda more grungy but it was exciting."

At the Rock School, students are encouraged to compete. That's when Richardson began entering the Youth American Grand Prix — or, as Richardson calls it, the YAGP — the largest international student dance competition on the globe for ages 9-19. The Grand Prix is such a crucial step towards a ballet career — securing dance scholarships and company contracts — that a 2011 documentary, *First Position*, focused on six competing dancers. One such dancer, Michaela DePrince, was a fellow student and good friend of Richardson's at the Rock.

"For ABT, they saw me at YAGP," Richardson says. "But I was really happy at the Rock. My mom wasn't

really ready for me to move to New York. I mean, I wasn't ready to move to New York either."

The following year, ABT again offered Richardson a spot with the Studio Company — a student branch; this time, she was ready.

Shelly Richardson returned to the family in Eugene and Rachel Richardson moved into a SoHo apartment in New York City, provided by ABT, where she now lives with seven dancers and a "house mom." At ABT Studio Company, Richardson takes classes and performs in ABT's annual performance of *The Nutcracker* alongside company dancers as well as principles and soloists, which has been challenging.

"I was terrified in my first company class. I didn't want to move," she says of training with company dancers, some who have been with ABT for 15 years. "It was really good for me but it was scary."

Richardson returns to ABT in September for this decisive year and she remains unsure but confident of her future. "If you're in the Studio Company there's a pretty good chance of you getting an apprenticeship. Since they saw me at YAGP, they told me that they were interested in me ..." she pauses. "I have no idea. It's a really wonderful company and it would be great to dance for them."

Regardless of where Richardson ends up, she says that ballet has taught her a lot about life. "I think a lot of life lessons I've learned are just from the sort of — not peculiar — but less normal experiences, like the fact that I moved away, living with so many other people and so many foreign people so young and then living alone in New York."

"Ballet specifically, discipline is a big one," she says, adding, "I think definitely sense of self and knowledge of yourself. You have to grow into it. You have to really understand yourself really well." ■



EUGENE WEEKLY



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SENIOR MOMENTS DANCE TEAM PERFORMS NEXT AUG. 10 FOR A PRO-BONE-O BENEFIT

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

# Footloose & 55-plus

**THE SENIOR MOMENTS TEAM BRING FLASHMOBS TO THE LOCAL SCENE**

by Rachael Carnes

The Senior Moments Dance Team got its start when Richard Walker, retired owner of Champion Friction, issued a public invitation in *The Register-Guard* to join a seniors' flashmob. Seventy-seven people showed up to that first rehearsal at the Vet's Club in May of 2013, and the group's been dazzling audiences ever since.

With notches in their belts for performances at the Oakway Center, Valley River Center, various retirement homes and, most recently, the Hult Center for the Performing Arts, Senior Moments wins hearts wherever they go. For the uninitiated, a flashmob is when a group of people who, seemingly spontaneously, flock together to perform a pre-organized performance, from pillow fights to choreographed dance numbers, like Senior Moments, in a public space.

"The most amazing thing is, people love us because we only last about a minute," quips retired financier Mike Morrison, the self-elected "founding officer" of the group.

"No," counters Connie Manning, owner of Bare Bones Dog Wash, "people love us because we're old and entertaining."

With a corps that hovers around 40 members ("We lose some in the winter, because people may not want to drive at night," says retired teacher Gwen Curran), Senior Moments is open to anyone age 55 or older. Currently, their oldest dancer is 92.

According to Sharon Snow, a retired professional fundraiser, one secret to their success is their

choreographer, Robert Schwartz. "He has a sensitivity," Snow says. "He makes us look good."

"My core belief is for everyone to be included in whatever way is appropriate for them," Schwartz says. "I like to bring dancing to where they are."

Schwartz notes that there's an elevator at the Vet's Club where the group meets on Monday nights at 7 pm, and dues are kept as low as possible. There's a discount for nonagenarians (ages 90-99) and a "three-digit free" policy.

With his colleague Jenn Hess, Schwartz has guided a group of mostly first-time movers from shopping malls to a world-class stage. "People are so much better than what their self image thinks they can do," Schwartz says.

The Senior Moments members tout improvement in their memories as the greatest benefit of learning and executing choreography. "This dancing is good for old folks," Morrison chimes. And beyond the cognitive, the group creates a pleasant social atmosphere. Snow adds, "People are concerned if you're not there at rehearsal."

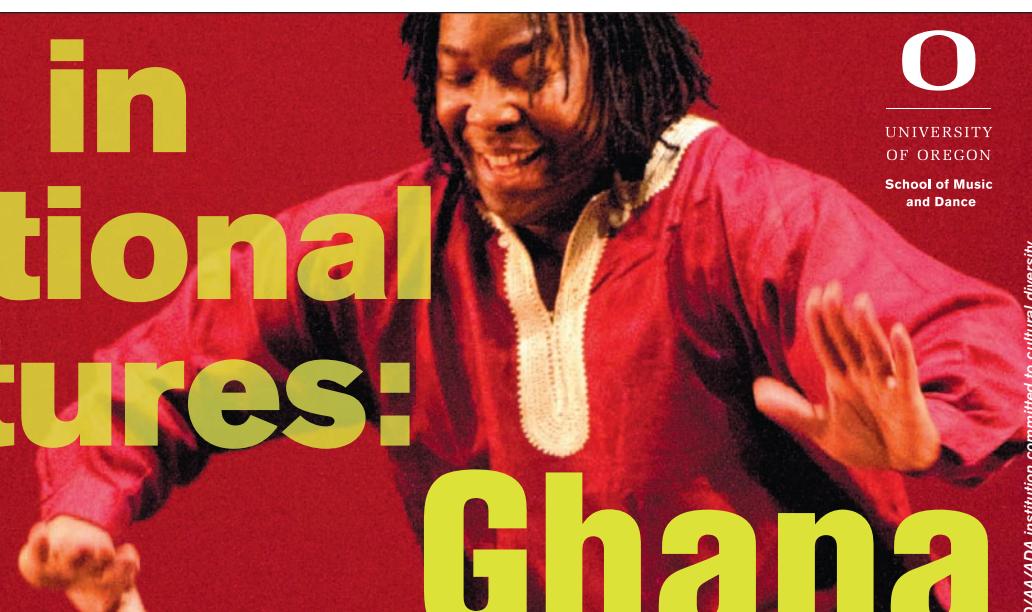
Right now, the group is rehearsing a sultry new number, "All That Jazz," for upcoming benefit performances Aug. 10 and 16.

Curran says, "We're gonna throw a little sex at 'em." ■

*Senior Moments Dance Team performs at the "Who Let the Dogs Out" benefit for Pro-Bone-O noon to 6 pm Sunday, Aug. 10, at 3365 E. Amazon, and the Courageous Kids benefit 4:30 to 7:30 pm Saturday, Aug. 16, at the Campbell Center. For more information on joining the Senior Moments Dance Team, visit lovewithmotion.com or call Mike Morrison at 485-1823.*

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# Dance in Traditional Cultures: Ghana



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# Not Your Average Barn Dance

**PETERSEN BARN OFFERS LOW-COST ACCESSIBLE DANCE CLASSES TO THE COMMUNITY** by Barbara Marty



PETERSEN BARN OFFERS DANCE CLASSES TO AGES AS YOUNG AS 14 MONTHS

**S**usan Kincaid never thought she would take dance classes and perform on stage. But, at 44, she finally found herself "brave enough" to step out of her comfort zone and try tap dancing at Petersen Barn Community Center.

"I honestly don't think I would have considered taking dance classes if it wasn't here," Kincaid says. "It makes a big difference to me that it is a community center because I would feel intimidated to go to a dance studio, and because you know ... I'm not your typical person that takes dance class," Kincaid says, referring to the fact that she doesn't live up to the classic athletic physique of most dancers.

Most people think of golf or skiing when they think of costly recreational activities, but dance classes can be a financial burden as well. From lessons and recital tickets to costumes and shoes, dance costs can prevent many low-income families from getting involved. Aware of this reality, the city of Eugene's Petersen Barn proposes affordable dance lessons and equipment for students from toddlers to seniors and beginners to advanced-level pupils.

Ruby McConnell, a local dancer and lead instructor at Petersen Barn, explains how the financial aspect, as well as the competitive atmosphere of many traditional studios, deters a lot of people like Kincaid from giving it a try. "We offered tap classes for three years and got nobody. And then I figured out that was because nobody could afford shoes," she says. "So now we have tap shoes that people can borrow, and our tap classes are packed."

From ballet to belly dance and hip hop to tap, Petersen Barn offers a wide range of

options, considering there's only a single room for practice and performing. The first class is always free and the short sessions — usually between five to six weeks for an average price of \$40 — allow students to find out what type of dance corresponds to them.

Because the program is entirely city-funded, Petersen Barn has also created lessons for people that aren't the target of regular studios: adult and senior beginners as well as children with physical or behavioral disabilities. Special-needs children are integrated and can take free one-on-one lessons. At the end-of-the-year recital, you may see retirees sharing the stage with wee little ones and teens.

Far from an atmosphere of rigid training, Petersen Barn encourages acceptance and imperfection. No need to be born with swiveling hips to enjoy McConnell's belly dance classes. The purpose is not to be perfect but to have fun and feel good about your body. "I always tell to my students, 'You're at the barn; this isn't the Bolshoi, you know.'"

Whatever your physical condition might be, everybody has a place on stage at the barn, thus bringing the Eugene community together. "I got kids that get picked up in Porsches and kids that are dropped off by bus, and they're all in there," McConnell says with a contagious laugh. "But once you started dancing, those things go away. Dance is a great equalizer, you know — the 'Holy crap! This is hard!'"

For more information about dance classes at Petersen Barn Community Center, 870 Berntzen Rd., visit [eugene-or.gov/recenroll](http://eugene-or.gov/recenroll) or call 682-5521.

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# From Ghana with Love

**UO PROF HABIB IDRISU ACTS AS INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR WEST AFRICAN HISTORY AND DANCE** by Vanessa Salvia

Habib Iddrisu has a slender, compact body, an unlined, youthful face and a handful of small, short dreads. The University of Oregon adjunct dance professor travels the world with traditional African singing and dance groups and actively teaches African history. But he won't reveal his age. "I keep that to myself," he says.

Iddrisu just returned from a month of research in his native Ghana. "I'm observing the hybridization of African music from the village to international stage," he says. This occurs when people visit the village or when villagers leave, join the national dance company and travel, then return to the village.

"I picked two or three different music and dances that originated from my village and followed their transformation to the city center and to stages across the world," he says. "I've seen a lot of development in it and I've also seen how these make their way back to the village, because everything is so connected now."

Iddrisu was born into a family of court musicians and historians in the small northern Ghanaian village of Taha. His ethnic group, the Lungsi order, is one of the most

powerful clans among the Dagbamba people, where music and dance go hand in hand.

"We are the most powerful because everything about our ethnic group is passed down through oral tradition," Iddrisu says. "Even though we are not part of the ruling class, the ruling chiefs and the queens and the queen mothers rely on us to recount the history of our people, which dates hundreds and hundreds of years back. We also provide entertainment for almost every occasion, from childbirth to naming ceremonies to puberty rites, marriage and even death."

His teaching focus is on the dance forms of the Sub-Saharan region in Africa, a large area that includes all countries south of the Sahara Desert. While the dances of Northern Africa have Middle Eastern roots, the dances of the other regions in Africa are noticeably different.

Though the dances of these many cultures have similarities, Iddrisu says they vary greatly between ethnic groups. "I'm from West Africa, which is the dance style that a lot of people in the United States are exposed to," he says, "but in my classes I teach dances which can come all the way from South Africa."

Iddrisu says one thing setting these dances apart is the "call-and-response" form. "West African dance forms tend to have a lot of it based on the drum call," he says. "The lead master drummer gives the signal and dancers respond to what the drummer plays." You may have seen him showcase this at the 2013 Dance Africa performance last winter at the UO Gerlinger Annex.

Sub-Saharan dances in general have what Iddrisu calls a "more grounded" form, in the sense that the dancers' knees are bent and for the most part remain touching the earth. Another unique feature of dance in South Africa is that the dancers often create the music themselves, rather than following a drummer or group of musicians.

Iddrisu describes a South African dance called the Gumboot, in which the dancers wear rubber boots, known as Wellingtons, with jingles attached to them. "The dancers create the rhythm style while wearing the rubber boots with jingles attached," he says. ■

*Habib Iddrisu will be teaching Dance in Traditional Cultures: Ghana and African Music courses fall term at the UO.*

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THE EUGENE ZYDECO DANCE COMMUNITY BOOGIES TO THE SOUNDS OF DWIGHT "BLACK CAT" CARRIER & THE ZYDECO RO DOGGS AT NEW DAY BAKERY JUNE 19



# Dance with Me

EUGENE'S PARTNER DANCE COMMUNITY IS BOOMING by Bryan Kalbrosky and Alex Notman

**P**eering through the fence at New Day Bakery in the Whiteaker on any second Wednesday, you may see the twirling of skirts, the shuffling of cowboy boots and dance partners shimmying to the sounds of accordion and washboard. If you squint and listen to the zydeco music, it almost feels like a bustling square in New Orleans.

That was the case on June 19 when the Eugene Zydeco Dance Community (EZDC) brought the Louisiana band Dwight "Black Cat" Carrier & the Zydeco Ro Doggs to the bakery's courtyard. Young and old, beginners and pros, men and women — a motley crew of pairs took to the stone floor as the sun went down. It became clear that night; Eugene has a thriving partner dance scene.

Janice Jensen, a retired local schoolteacher, was one of the organizers of that event. She says the local partner dancing community in Eugene boasts clubs for ballroom, contra, tango, zydeco and West Coast swing. Some clubs have memberships in the hundreds.

Jensen is active in ballroom, swing and zydeco dance

clubs. She recently volunteered to run a newsletter to keep the community informed about dance events in Eugene. "I do it as a service to the dance community to encourage people to go out and dance," she says.

One group featured in the newsletter is the monthly EZDC. Zydeco is a fast-paced, social dance that combines Cajun and Creole music with American blues, jazz and soul. The group meets for zydeco dancing on the second Wednesday evening of every month, with a 30-minute beginner lesson starting at 6:30 pm, at the New Day Bakery (449 Blair Blvd).

Another club Jensen features in the newsletter is the Eugene Swing Dance Club, founded in 1994. The club's Facebook group has nearly 350 members and dances are scheduled every Monday (and the occasional Saturday) at Mac's at The Vet's Club on Willamette. Each week, the club sees between 50 and 80 people. Admission is \$5 for members and students and \$7 for nonmembers, but the price is waived if you are a first-time participant. The first hour offers lessons from instructors for various skill sets, and the

rest of the night is open for social dancing hosted by a DJ.

"Some people come to socialize, but it's a dance," says Catherine Miller, president of the Eugene Swing Dance Club. "I love the dancing, music and laughing with friends."

For many, however, dance can have a more significant meaning than moving and mingling to the music. Three years ago, when she needed to find an exercise that she could do after a surgery, Jensen began taking ballroom lessons from Laura Taylor, an instructor at Dance With Us! studio.

"Dancing is a metaphor for moving forward in your life," Jensen says. "Not only the physical movement of dancing, but also the emotional idea of moving on like you do across the dance floor."

The next time you're walking down Blair or Willamette and you hear that music, grab a partner and dance.

To sign up for Jensen's newsletter, contact jcjrealestate@gmail.com. For more information about the Eugene Swing Dance Club, visit 68swing.com. EZDC's next dance is Wednesday Aug. 13 at New Day Bakery.

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 342-4611

## Ballet North West Academy

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## Crossroads Blues Fusion Dance

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## Emerald Square Dance Center

Square  
[www.emeraldempiredance.com](http://www.emeraldempiredance.com)

## Eugene Argentine Tango

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[marislarizik.com](http://marislarizik.com)  
 485-6647

## Eugene Ballet Academy

Ballet, modern, jazz, tap, hip hop  
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[info@eugeneballetacademy.org](mailto:info@eugeneballetacademy.org)  
[eugeneballetacademy.org](http://eugeneballetacademy.org)  
 686-9342

## Eugene Ballet Company

Ballet, contemporary  
 Riley Grannan, Managing Director,  
[riley@eugeneballet.org](mailto:riley@eugeneballet.org)  
[eugeneballet.org](http://eugeneballet.org)  
 485-3992

## Eugene Country Dancers

English and Scottish country dance  
[stephen@s2graphics.com](mailto:stephen@s2graphics.com)  
 485-3503

## Eugene Dance Studio — Love With Motion

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[lovewithmotion.com](http://lovewithmotion.com)  
 232-9699

## Eugene International Folk Dancers

Folk  
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## Eugene Scottish Country Dancers

Scottish country — beginners welcome  
[jrburger1@gmail.com](mailto:jrburger1@gmail.com)  
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## Eugene Swing Dance Club

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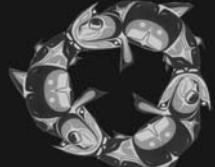
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staverdancesport.com  
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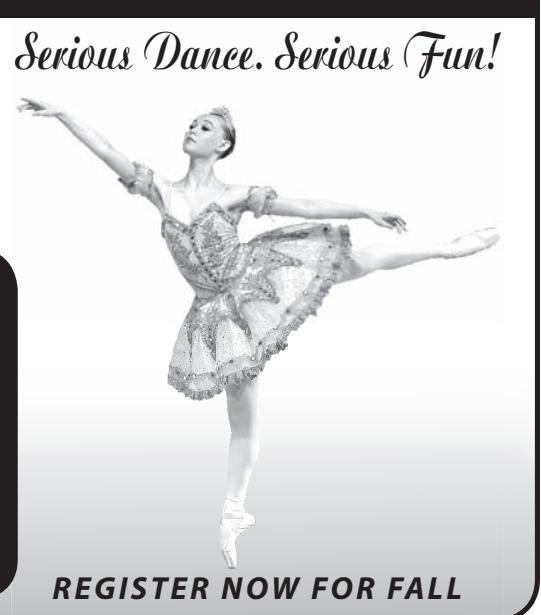
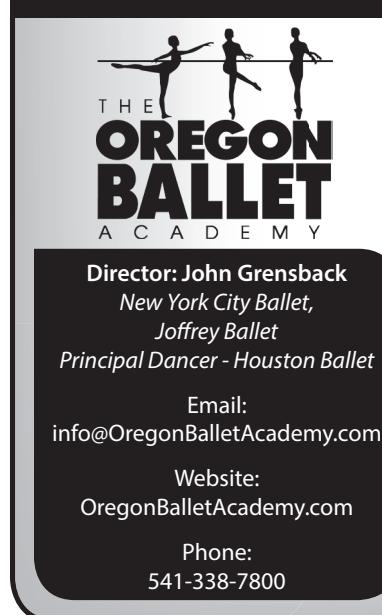
Give yourself and your partner the gift of learning the dances that make these times fun, romantic and memorable! It's time you took the first step!

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*Laura Taylor & Robert Phaigh*



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